



Popular Music Education
A White Paper by the Association for Popular Music Education

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Introduction

The Association for Popular Music Education (APME), founded in 2010, is the world's leading organization in popular music education, galvanizing a community of practice, scholarship and innovation around the field. APME presents herein a report on popular music education. Music education – meaning formal schooling in music – has tended most of the time to exclude almost all forms and contexts of music, and therefore has also elided most models of music learning and teaching. Popular music is among these excluded musics. Popular music education (hereafter PME) is complex, and can appear elusive, exclusive and inclusive. This is in part because of the complexity, fluidity and cultural contingency of the term, 'popular music'. It is a term that many outside the academy do not recognize – for them, it is simply music that they like or with which they are familiar. Some individuals and subcultures invest considerable effort into discovering and partaking in local or global scenes, in physical or online spaces; others like the music that reaches them as more or less passive consumers in a music-saturated world. Popular music – as many other types of music – can sound vastly different (as well as often being strikingly similar) in different territories. PME's variable status and characteristics are also the properties of a genre of music that is forever redefining itself, through the work of musicians, marketers and journalists – and, increasingly, educators. PME is inherently diverse and inclusive as a field, if not in every discrete instance. Individual programs and courses are often somewhat non-diverse, catering to the needs of a particular group of students, or reflecting the expertise of an educator or group of teachers. The label, *popular music education*, places its practices and practitioners outside of much mainstream discourse in music education and music teacher education, while it also serves as a rallying point for many who have felt excluded from normative discourse and practice in their field.

The report is based on the knowledge, perspectives and experience of APME Board members, and therefore reflects the English-speaking and largely US American orientation of the contributors. We recognize that popular music is as diverse as the world's cultures, and that



writing on PME is as nuanced as the languages in which it is communicated. We acknowledge well-established popular music education traditions in, for example, Germany, the Netherlands, France, Brazil, Sweden, Finland and Brazil, as representing highly developed music education systems and practices that may not be fully accounted for in this document. This acknowledgement is an indicator of the complexity of the terrain of PME and the difficulties inherent in trying to account for its diversity. What this white paper covers, therefore, is broadly the scholarship and praxis that has become discussed under the rubric of PME in English-language scholarship and discourse.

PME is exciting, dynamic and often innovative. However, it is nothing new. Teaching students about, and training them in contemporary commercial music has roots stretching at least as far back as community college curricula of the 1930s in the USA.¹ As music education scholar, Lucy Green, has noted,² “Popular music education has come of age”. Green goes on to say that:

What we have now is a meta-field: one that researches what else happens when popular music’s presence in education causes changes to both curriculum and pedagogy; and, more importantly perhaps, what could happen and what should happen. Furthermore, the answers to those questions are... very different depending on the social, cultural and musical contexts.

2017 was arguably the year that popular music education indeed came of age, since that year saw the publication of the first academic handbook in the field – the *Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music Education* – and the first journal dedicated to it: the *Journal of Popular Music Education*.

What is Popular Music Education?

Popular music is qualitatively different from other forms of music, in function and aesthetics (although there are areas of commonality). PME, therefore, may also be understood as necessarily different from Western Art Music (WAM) education. However, APME does not intend to construct or to construe PME as existing or working in opposition to existing music education programs and paradigms. PME, like popular music, is highly complex, problematic and challenging, as well as being inspiring and deeply meaningful to many people, individually and collectively. This is true of all musical traditions, their associated hierarchies, embedded

¹ Krikun, A. (2017). The historical foundations of popular music education in the United States, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music Education*.

² Green, L. (2017). Foreword, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music Education*.



practices and assumptions, and attendant educational practices. APME recognizes that change, stasis and tradition all constitute the lifeblood of popular music. As such, and to reflect that ongoing change, the authors assert that popular music education practice and scholarship must remain reflexive, allowing for and embracing constant revision and re-contextualization. As such, this paper marks a moment in time, but is not intended to codify, define or delimit PME.

Popular music has a growing presence in education, formal and otherwise, from primary school to postgraduate study. Programs, courses and classes in popular music studies, popular music performance, songwriting, production and areas of music technology are becoming commonplace across higher education and compulsory schooling. Additionally, specialist graded examination syllabi, such as RSL (formerly Rock School) and Trinity Rock & Pop, have emerged in recent years, meaning that it is now possible for school leavers in some countries to be certified to meet university entry requirements after studied only popular music. In the context of teacher education, classroom teachers and music specialists alike are becoming increasingly empowered to introduce popular music into their classrooms.

Despite the recent expansion in work in and around PME, it remains an emerging area. PME in higher education contexts often falls under the rubric of popular music *studies* (PMS). Roger Mantie has discussed the lack of a coherent conversation around “popular music pedagogy” in scholarly writing, and in Harald Jørgensen’s (2009) comprehensive study of higher music education, the reference to PME is minimal, with a majority of higher popular music education (HPME) provision taking place in institutions not recognized by his typology of institutions for higher music education (i.e., private providers without university status).³ Research in PME lies at the intersection of the fields of music education, ethnomusicology, community music, cultural studies and popular music studies, among others.

Who are the Popular Music Educators?

The following is quoted directly from the editorial article introducing the issue 1, volume 1 of the *Journal of Popular Music Education*.⁴

The popular music education world is populated by two largely separate but far from discrete communities. One of these groups tends to see *JPME* as the Journal of (Popular) Music Education; this group comprises mostly school music teachers and those who

³ Jørgensen, H. (2009). *Research into higher music education: An overview from a quality improvement perspective*.

⁴ Smith, G.D. & Powell, B. (2017). Welcome to the journal, *Journal of Popular Music Education*, 1(1)



work in higher education institutions to ‘train’ teacher/musicians for the workplace. For them, music education is a high art and prized craft; PME is one part of the jigsaw puzzle of a schoolteacher’s diverse portfolio of approaches to learning, teaching and assessment. The other community views *JPME* as the Journal of Popular Music (Education); this group primarily teaches popular music studies (including popular music performance, business and songwriting) in institutions of higher education. For them the goal is to learn (about) popular music; ‘education’ is implicit in the fact that this activity takes place in a college or university. These two communities (crudely bifurcated as they are here, for the purposes of this short editorial) collide and collaborate at APME conferences. They rarely seem to bump into one another, however, at meetings of IASPM (frequented primarily by members of the popular music studies community) or ISME (attended mainly by music teachers and music teacher teachers). Other communities with evidence of keen scholarly interest in PME include those around community music and jazz education. Krikun (2016) has written on how jazz education and PME have, at various points in time and place, been identical, and in community music, popular music is often front-and-center. Ethnomusicology, sociology, media studies and communication scholars also study what could broadly be construed as PME.

There are significant challenges around encouraging, celebrating, discussing and perpetuating practices and attitudes that can be highly problematic. Popular music is an arena in which are played out crucial ethical, musical, educational and fundamentally human struggles of our time. Popular music educators must ask ourselves to whose standards, attitudes or beliefs would we wish to be held accountable.⁵

PME is powerful and potent. The following is again quoted directly from the editorial article introducing the issue 1, volume 1 of the *Journal of Popular Music Education*:⁶

People’s experiences of education are frequently self-defining and life-changing – affirming, uplifting, crushing, celebratory and (dis)empowering by turns; the same can be said of people’s encounters with music. Humans’ engagement with popular music and experiences of education are vital to people’s understanding and tolerance of themselves and one another. APME believes in the necessity and transformative power

⁵ Woodward, S. (2017). Social justice and popular music education: Building a generation artists impacting social change, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music Education*.

⁶ Smith, G.D. & Powell, B. (2017). Welcome to the journal, *Journal of Popular Music Education*, 1(1)



of deep educational experiences that critique and enable, challenge and transform. Popular music exists at the intersection of folk and celebrity cultures, combining the

everyday with the exceptional and fantastic. It merges commerce, community, commodity and the construction of meanings. People live their lives both as popular musicians and through popular musicians, realizing identities as fans, consumers and practitioners. Popular music scenes, communities and subcultures are local, regional, national and international. PME thus takes place at the cross sections of identity realization, learning, teaching, enculturation, entrepreneurship, creativity, a global multimedia industry, and innumerable leisure, DIY and hobbyist networks – online, and in physical spaces. Popular music education is business and social enterprise. It is personal and it is collective. It is vocational and avocational, and it builds and develops communities.

Like other forms of education, PME has the potential to work for the betterment of society by positively impacting individuals' lives. It can also be deleterious.⁷ Popular music educators, along with the establishments and communities wherein they work, have a duty to ensure that it works for the greater good.

There are big questions that we are empowered and excited to ask at this critical juncture:

- How might we view the potential impact of popular music education in broader society?
- Where, how and why is the PME community to proceed?

We should note here that the interconnected fields of popular music and popular music education may be understood as caught in a power struggle between the competing, contradictory and, paradoxically, symbiotic forces of capitalist market pressures, individual entitlement and agency, mutual dependency and social democratic aspirations.⁸ The future is certainly exciting. Popular music education will have important roles to play.

⁷ Parkinson.T. & Smith, G.D. (2015). Towards an epistemology of authenticity in higher popular music education, *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education*, 14(1).

⁸ Hebert, D.G., Abramo, J. & Smith, G.D. (2017). Epistemological and sociological issues in popular music education, *The Routledge Research Companion to Popular Music Education*.



Appendix A – Common Practice in Popular Music Education

Areas of Teaching, Learning and Assessment in popular music

- Playing instruments, and/or other devices, and/or singing for the purpose of performing, composing, songwriting, and recording contemporary and historical popular music, collaboratively and alone.
- Recording and/or performing with technology, including a wide range of digital audio workstations (DAWs).
- Music theory, including harmony, listening skills, charting, arranging.
- Understanding the instruments and equipment used to create and perform popular music, including their history, manufacture, operation, care and repair.
- Popular music's personal, cultural, social, historical and political milieus.
- Practice-as-research and practice-led research projects, especially at graduate and postgraduate levels, embracing research and development, market research.
- Music directing.
- Sound design, engineering and production (see also recording and performance, above).
- Event management, including production, promotion, logistics, economics, and touring.
- Government, law and commerce, including publishing, licensing, rights, and interactions between commercial aesthetic, social, community and other imperatives.
- Music teaching and community music engagement.
- Music business, industries, and ecosystems, including multimedia, multi-channel, and multi-platform creation, dissemination, and consumption.

Approaches

- One-to-one lessons on an instrument
- One-to-many lessons on an instrument
- Ensemble performance classes (repertoire, interpretation and original material)
- No requirement for principal study instrument or instruments
- Collaborative workshops for e.g. songwriting, lyric writing, mixing
- Online synchronous and asynchronous collaborations in composition/production and performance
- Online video lessons, passive and interactive



- Formal, non-formal and informal learning methods
- Chalk-and-talk lessons in theory
- Music, chart and score reading and sight-reading/sight-singing

Assessment

- Rubrics
- Solo and ensemble performance, assessing groups and individuals
- Portfolio submissions of performances (video/audio)
- Commercially packaged EP/LP audio recordings
- Theory and aural tests
- Written essay submissions – academic and journalistic
- Arranged scores for popular music instruments and WAM instruments.
- Peer assessment, tutor assessment, assessment by industry experts
- Master classes from industry representatives in e.g. marketing, production, performance, music directing.
- Reflective and reflexive critiques.
- Self-directed project assessment



Appendix B – References and further reading

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